

The Sorting

Introduction

- Jesus said, *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (Matthew 13:47-50, ESV)
- Many struggle today to understand God's true nature. They see His terror and wrath in the Old Testament and His love and compassion in the New Testament, and often come to the conclusion that it's somehow a *different* God from one covenant to the other. This is not, however, the case, as our God does not change! (James 1:17) God has always spoken of His judgment throughout the entire Bible, and of the sorting He would perform in separating those who loved Him from those who did not.
- As Jesus said, to truly understand the kingdom, and by extension to understand God Himself, we must accept that God's judgment has both blessings and terrible cursings associated with it. We will either be found to be righteous and enjoy eternal comfort, or be found to be evil and face the fiery furnace.
- Let's look at an Old Testament book where both of these ideas are portrayed together, in order to better understand that God has always required His people to follow Him if they hope to enjoy the blessings of eternal peace, and how He also condemns those who will not follow Him to utter ruin and destruction. That prophet is **Nahum**.
- Nahum's ministry was to the nation of Assyria. If you'll remember from Jonah, the capitol city of Nineveh was receptive to God's message and repented in about 750 BC. Only about 25 years later, they would lay waste to the nation of Israel and take them into captivity. Just before their eventual destruction by Babylon in 612 BC, Nahum comes to them with a message of condemnation from God, saying *"Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder ..."* (Nahum 3:1, ESV)

The Sorting Is Part of God's Goodness

God Is Good And Merciful

- Nahum exclaimed that, *"The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him."* (Nahum 1:7, ESV)
- These words (and those in Nahum 1:2-3) also echo the words of God Himself to Moses after the children of Israel built the golden calf at the foot of Sinai, *"... 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*

keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, ..." (Exodus 34:6–7a, ESV)

- This is, of course, what we prefer to think about when it comes to God's nature. It's comforting to know that God is good, brings safety, shows mercy, grace, patience, love, and faithfulness by forgiving us of our sins. There is truly none like God, yet as we'll consider later, these blessings are, in fact, conditional.

But God Is Also Avenging And Wrathful

- Nahum goes on to say, *"But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness."* (Nahum 1:8, ESV)
- Again, these echo the words of God to Moses, *"... but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."* (Exodus 34:7b, ESV)
- So which is it? Is God "good" or is He "wrathful"? To understand God's complete nature, we must understand that His goodness makes Him BOTH the One who blesses and the One who punishes. This is not some kind of paradox that we need to overcome ... just look to a parent's relationship with their children to see how this works. When a parent goes to either extreme of only lavishing blessings on their children or only punishing them, even if they haven't done anything wrong, we see the error of this approach quite obviously. God as our Father shows us the perfect balance in requiring His children to live by His standard, and either blessing them for their obedience or punishing them for their disobedience. Both approaches are required, and God shows us the way in His handling of us even today.

The Sorting Is Part of God's Justice

Justice For God's Jealousy

- God's justice comes from His holy jealousy over us, *"The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet."* (Nahum 1:2–3, ESV)
- Like a spouse wants faithfulness and love from their partner, God demands the same from His people. When we choose to leave His side, we cannot expect to escape or somehow be pardoned. His justice demands that He cannot clear the guilty. But wait, aren't we all guilty of sin? Praise be to God that He has given us Jesus whose blood can wash away those sins and, in spite of our guilt, can make us appear before God as one who is pure and holy! For those who are not in union with Christ however, there is no way to escape from the wrath of the Almighty God.

But Also Justice For The Oppressed

- As Assyria would be decimated, God said, *"There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?"* (Nahum 3:19, ESV)
- God not only executes justice on His own behalf, but also for those who have been oppressed by the hands of the evildoers. There is a certain vindication that will come to those who the righteous who have suffered at the hands of the unrighteous when all stand before God in judgment. This is, however, not an excuse for us to enact vengeance against our enemies today! As Paul said, *"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* (Romans 12:19–21, ESV)

The Sorting Is Based On Our Choice

Peace To The Obedient

- While God has focussed on Assyria, He turns His attention to Judah's faithfulness and says, *"Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off."* (Nahum 1:15, ESV)
- It should go without saying, but God's determination of those who are righteous and those who are unrighteous is not purely in His control. He gives us the choice, and with every hour that passes on this earth, you're choosing which side of the judgment you'll be on. Will you remain faithful to Him, worshiping Him, and fulfilling your commitment to Him? If you're able to stay committed to Him, through the grace of His Son Jesus, you will experience the most amazing peace that has ever existed ... a peace between you and your Creator!

But Ruin To The Unrepentant

- Finally God turns back to Nineveh, and points out the end of their disobedience, *"Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. "Halt! Halt!" they cry, but none turns back. Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things. Desolate! Desolation and ruin! Hearts melt and knees tremble; anguish is in all loins; all faces grow pale!"* (Nahum 2:8–10, ESV)
- For those who would not choose a life of dedication to God, turning back from the old life of sinfulness and corruption, God promises desolation and ruin. This was true for Assyria, and it is still true today. God does not change, and neither do His requirements or punishments for disobedience. As the Hebrew writer said, *"How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has*

profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:29-31, ESV)

Conclusion

- Where will you stand on the final day when we're all sorted? Will you have been found faithful to Him and enjoy the reward, or will your evil deeds be made known and suffer eternal destruction?
- God is good, but don't mistake His goodness for tolerance of your wanton sinfulness. Examine yourself and work out your salvation with fear and trembling, lest you face His judgment unprepared for the consequences of eternal separation from Him!